


Oswego stepping up push for Metra in Kendall County: 'This isn't just about getting people to jobs downtown'

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Linda Girardi

 Oswego plans to intensify its lobbying efforts to extend Metra's commuter rail service on the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway beyond Aurora into Kendall County.

"This isn't just about getting people to jobs downtown," Oswego Village President Gail Johnson said. A third 9-mile rail line would be needed to bring commuter rail service to the region.

"This provides a new economic development tool that Oswego isn't privy to without this," Johnson said.

The majority of village trustees were supportive of having the administrative staff begin the process of hiring a lobbyist firm to represent the village's interests in Springfield should a capital bill be written next year. Village officials began to meet with lobbying firms when they realized 50/50 matching funds could be available through a capital improvement program, Johnson said.

"While we believe the project could qualify for federal dollars down the line, we first have to secure matching funds," she told trustees Tuesday.

The village would look to neighboring communities to share the costs of the lobbyists estimated at \$5,000 - \$10,000 per month.

Oswego doesn't have access to expressways to draw corporate entities as do Naperville and Lisle, the village president said.

The economic development that occurs around commuter train stations strengthens the property tax rolls and reduces the burden on residential property taxpayers, she said.

Intensifying the lobbying shows one of the ways Oswego is serious about the project. The village has already acquired 15-acres for a future Metra commuter lot at the northwest corner of Orchard Road and Mill Street. The land was part of a planned unit development agreement for 98.3 acres on the west side of Orchard Road north of the BNSF rail line.

Access to rail transportation frequently comes up from corporate investors looking for potential sites, Oswego Economic Development Director Corinna Cole told village trustees.

Cole said the anticipation of mass transit access has been "one of the biggest challenges" for the Orchard Road corridor.

"Commuter rail is an important economic development tool and necessary for potential employers. They want to know if their workers can access them," she said.

Feasibility studies to extend the BNSF line to Kendall County began in the early 2000s with stops and starts along the way, Oswego Public Works Director Jennifer Hughes said.

She said they expect Metra to authorize preliminary engineering and environmental contracts by the end of this year and to have those completed by the end of 2019.

For the Metra project to move forward, the studies are needed to determine the location and infrastructure costs associated with commuter stations, she said.

Capital improvement bills in Illinois come along "so infrequently" that the 2019 legislative session "may be the only opportunity in the next decade to leverage state funds as part of our local match," village officials said.

According to the village, the estimate to extend a third rail line is \$150 million to \$300 million, depending on where the last stop on the line will be. The federal government could contribute 50 percent of the capital cost through the New Starts program, but the remaining 50 percent would have to be funded by the state or local sources.

The village is encouraged that the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning has formally endorsed extending Metra's BNSF commuter rail service from Aurora to Sandwich as a "high priority" in its On To 2050 comprehensive plan, which was adopted by the group Oct. 10.

To be eligible for federal funding, the project has to be listed in the comprehensive plan and considered a "fiscally constrained" high priority project. Currently the Metra extension is listed as a "fiscally un-constrained" lower priority project, village officials said.

However, the rating can be amended to reflect the results of the next phase of engineering, they said.

"The local share can be paid partially through the state capital bill. It would not necessarily be all from our riders and taxpayers," Hughes said.

"It's important to position ourselves for that opportunity. This is not to say a Metra extension will be built next week but at the same time we do not want to close the door for that to happen," Hughes said.

"We want to have our foot in the door when the capital bill does come forward," she said.

Village administrator Dan Di Santo has told the Beacon-News that local communities eventually will have to decide whether to join the Regional Transportation Authority. But before the village can fully discuss joining the RTA, it needs to know much more about the project such as the location of the last stop and the total cost.

The RTA oversees Metra, Pace and the Chicago Transit Authority. Currently Kendall County is the only collar county in the region that is not a member of the RTA.

"There are two ways to join the RTA – one is to pass a referendum to join, which means a 0.75 percent sales tax would be implemented in Kendall County like the other collar counties (0.50 percent goes to RTA and 0.25 percent goes to the county). This is the traditional way, and would mean that not only would Kendall County pay into the Metra system but also would receive Pace bus services."

The second way to join is under 'extra-territorial authority,' which essentially means whatever other deal you can work out with the RTA.

"This is the route we used to partner with the RTA to operate our Park and Ride facility," Di Santo has said.

"We do not believe it is appropriate to talk about joining the RTA unless we know that Metra service is coming to Kendall County," Di Santo has said.

Trustee Ryan Kauffman said "without a doubt" he is supportive of a Metra extension knowing people have been asking about this for years.

"Every neighbor I speak to who commutes to the city asks when are we getting a train station," Kauffman said. "A lot of people have been frustrated, due to no fault to anybody here, but it's had a long lead time from 2000 to 2018. It's been two decades and we're still trying to get the project going," he said.

"I want to do whatever I can to get out and push to move this project along. I know it's a very popular idea. I believe that to the very core of my being," the trustee said.

Linda Girardi is a freelance reporter for The Beacon-News.